By 1stLt. Timothy Humphreys, USMC

It was my first true cross-country, and I never had been to the West Coast before, let alone San Diego. So, when I was offered the opportunity to fly to Miramar for my airways navigation cross-country, I jumped at the chance. It was a glorious weekend: sun, surf, sand, and friends I had not seen in who knows how long. I doubt any cross-country could have been scripted any better. Despite it being Friday the 13th, we arrived safely and on time, and everything went well until we decided to come home.

After a weekend of relaxation, my IP and I arrived at MCAS Miramar base ops at 0900, with a plan to hit the road by 1100. However, things were not going to work out as planned. Bad weather was developing in several locations along our route between San Diego and NAS Meridian. We knew flexibility would be the theme of the day. Sure enough, after our first leg, our plans changed. Storms over Houston forced us to switch our next destination to Dallas-Ft. Worth.

Once we were on deck in Dallas, a quick visit with weather confirmed our other concerns: Weather was deteriorating around Meridian, and several sigmets were in effect along our planned

I Always Wanted to Drive a Convertible

route. We decided to delay our decision until after a nutritious detour to the local Taco Bell. When we returned an hour later to the weather office, the weather was not good—it was decision time. We decided to let prudence rule. Instead of filing for Meridian, we filed for New Orleans, where the forecasts and observations were favorable. This plan also would allow us to turn en route toward Meridian if the weather in Mississippi improved. After flying nearly 20 minutes toward New Orleans, the weather did improve, and we changed our destination to Meridian.

The events seemed to be going our way—we would not have to spend the night in New Orleans. We would arrive home within recovery hours, and we wouldn't have poor weather in our way.

The sun began to set after 30 minutes of flying. As the instruments darkened, I raised my tinted visor and turned up the rheostats. We had smooth sailing. There wasn't much traffic in the air, nor on the radio. We recalculated our fuel and continually updated our weather.

We descended from our cruising altitude to a recovery altitude over Jackson, Miss. Having penetrated a thin cloud layer and broken out around FL230, we clearly could make out the lights of the city. I got that warm feeling you get when you turn onto the road leading to your childhood home. Everything was familiar, and everything led to our backyard. While passing FL200, however, we heard the sound of rapid decompression—a noise I cannot describe accurately but one I never will forget. It was not the noise, though, that first keyed me into the situation we were entering. Instead, it was all the debris flying around the cockpit and collecting in the rear of the aircraft, where I was strapped in. Approach plates, charts, notes, anything you can imagine, bounced around my canopy like a lottery machine. I tried to lower my visor, only to discover it was in several pieces.

Elapsed time: five seconds. I realized the sound of the air stream and the engines had increased dramatically. A few seconds later, we had lost our canopy. With a death grip, I squeezed the controls and pulled back the throttles, to slow our airspeed and to shallow our descent. We were about 280 knots. I could feel the nose needed extra nose-up trim.

Elapsed time: 10 seconds. I looked at my canopy and saw splattered blood. My first instinct was that my instructor was injured. I keyed the ICS, "Sir, sir…are you still there? Sir?" As I feared, there was no immediate answer.

I contemplated reaching for the ejection-select handle to gain control in the rear.

Two seconds later, however, I heard in my headset, "Tim, Tim… are you still with me?"

I hurried to tell my instructor I was there, but my microphone didn't work. My mask was jammed into my face, with the microphone between my teeth, and the cord dangled in the breeze. I briskly pumped the controls three times. Immediately, my instructor confirmed he was taking the controls.

Elapsed time: 20 seconds. "Center, Bobcat 49, declaring an emergency...I have lost my canopy!" I was satisfied my instructor was in good shape, and the situation was, for the moment, under control. I tightened my lap belts like I never had tightened them before. I fixed my mask so I could talk with my instructor. Once I took off my mask, I realized our situation was more serious. Blood dripped profusely from my nose and mouth. I quickly wiped my face clean and reconnected my mask. Finally, I was able to tell the instructor I still was there.

Once I took off my mask, I realized our situation was more serious.

Elapsed time: 45 seconds. I began to feel the pain throughout my face, nose, mouth, jaw, and eyes. I discovered a hefty cut above my right eye that had caused it to swell. The air in the cockpit also made the blood quickly dry, and soon my right eye swelled shut. I finally dug up the courage to tell my instructor I was injured. His reaction was rather predictable, "Oh *#$%!"

Elapsed time: two minutes. It wasn't until we were 60 miles from Meridian that I felt comfortable we could bring the jet home. I maintained electrical control and activated the strobes to increase our visibility. Our lookout doctrine was altered. I continued to switch the radio freqs as needed and backed up the landing checks. I grabbed all the loose gear I could and stowed it in the map case. I removed the seat and canopy-safety pins from the map case and placed them under my leg so I quickly could get out of the plane after landing. I also wiped as much blood as I could from the gyro and canopy so I could back up on the instruments and search for the field.

Elapsed time: 10 to 15 minutes. We finally were in the terminal area of Meridian. I recognized the voices of the approach and tower controller. As we slowed, the beating I was taking from the air stream became more vicious, and the noise increased. Even lowering the seat to the deck did little to help the abuse I was receiving in our new convertible. Eventually, I had to duck my head behind the instrument panel and cover my helmet with my arms. After a debate over the radio about the virtues of taking a trap, we convinced the tower controller we didn't want to trap. We were safe on deck a few minutes later. Rescue crews were on the roll and assisted us. Medical personnel rushed us to a local emergency room. My instructor was treated and released that night; he was relatively untouched. I had two black eyes, nine stitches in my right eyebrow,

a swollen jaw, and a banged-up nose. I was released early the next morning.

Here are three learning points I will remember throughout my career from this exhilarating and humbling experience:

• *Clear Visors.* I will wear my advertisement for clear visors—in the form of a scar over my right eye—for the rest of my life. As aviators, we need to make a conscious decision about using our visors. Too often, we view them as a hassle, a nuisance, or even an afterthought. Without a visor, you risk your safety and your career.

• *Flexibility.* Even before our incident, flexibility was a defining concept of our journey. We had to keep aware of changing conditions in our vicinity and at our destinations. Solid planning and decision-making helped us deal with the emergency. We eliminated one extra headache that may have made a tough situation unbearable.

• *Crew Coordination.* Despite the drama and the confusion of our mishap, the obvious benefits of crew coordination cannot be overlooked. Maintaining communication between crew members and balancing workloads made it easier to deal with the emergency and return home.

1stLt. Humphreys flies with VT-9.

VT-9 ASO note: *The plexiglass over the front section of canopy shattered in flight; the rear section remained intact. The injuries to 1stLt. Humphreys were caused by pieces of plexiglass traveling aft inside the cockpit and from windblast to the face. The instructor was behind the front windscreen and had no injuries, even though he also did not have his clear visor installed, and his dark visor was in the up position. This incident resulted in Class C damage to the aircraft. Extensive safety and engineering investigations were unable to find any conclusive proof that aircrew, maintenance, material, or other factors caused this mishap.*

Another View
From the Convertible

By Lt. Bruce Marsack

My Marine student never had been west of Arkansas. His friends at Miramar showed him a good time, and he discovered that there is fun beyond "Deliverance."

On the descent, 70 miles west of Meridian, all hell broke loose in our T-2 cockpit. My first reaction to the decompression, noise, wind, and confusion, was to take the controls. I closed my eyes for an instant and crouched down. I tried to get my face close to the instrument panel and out of the windblast. We still were flying, and there were no indications of an airframe failure: no unusual G's or hot, bright sensations of fire. I put down my visor, turned up my instrument-panel lights, and squawked emergency. Then I managed to get a positive ICS check with my student.